

**The Importance of Historical Education for the Youth of this Generation: Case Studies
include the Warsaw Uprising and Dachau Concentration Camp**

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Many have said that history is doomed to be repeated if we do not learn from the past and try to understand the significance it plays in our daily life. Society has become ignorant of the sacrifices that were made to create a future, free from tyranny and evil. With narcissistic tendencies, society has become deeply self-absorbed. Mina Rosner felt a responsibility to write her book, *I Am a Witness*, believing that “there is no guarantee that another Holocaust will not occur”¹. With the current societal norm, including blindness and intolerance towards others, it is imperative that each and every person learns the events in our history and their significance. History allows us to study a multitude of perspectives and preserve the commemoration of specific events and how they still speak to us to this day. We learn of the tragedies that people went through, so their story is not forgotten. The history of the Warsaw Uprising and Dachau concentration camp, are examples of moments in history that have lost their meaning in the present day to many people, including myself. This investigation aims to tackle the importance of educating students today on these two specific events, as they have impacted my life and my passion for history. By reflecting on my personal journey to these historical landmarks, and documenting my own observations of the public behavior displayed, I have found a new purpose for writing this essay.

The Warsaw Uprising (August 1- October 2, 1944) was an insurrection by which Polish Jews and other Polish underground resistance groups, such as the Home Army (AK) attempted to overthrow the Nazi regime, and seize control of the city before it was occupied by the advancing Soviet Army, which they believed to be on the allied side.² 166,000 people lost their lives in the uprising, including perhaps as many as 17,000 Polish Jews who had either fought with the AK or had been discovered in hiding³. In their hour of need the allies turned away, the Poles were abandoned to fight on their own for freedom and independence for the second time in less than five years. Men, women and children, were “ordinary people who had no desire other than to live normal lives,”⁴ made a sacrifice, not for themselves, but for future generations to live in peace. In the end, the Polish fighters were forced to surrender, and the Germans systematically liquidated

¹ Mina Rosner, *I Am a Witness*, Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1990.

² Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Warsaw Uprising." Encyclopædia Britannica. January 30, 2019. Accessed June 19, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Warsaw-Uprising>.

³ Andrew Borowiec. Destroy Warsaw!: Hitler's Punishment, Stalin's Revenge Hardcover – Sep 30 2001, 179.

⁴ Rosner, *I Am a Witness*.

the Polish population and burned Warsaw to the ground. However, the idea of hope and freedom never died in this tragedy. It is essential for young people to study their own history and make a personal connection to why the sacrifice was made in the first place. Many forget the reasons behind why these “ordinary” people gave everything, even if they knew that death was certain. The focus should not be on whether or not it was successful, but the moral and ethical grounds in which it was fought for Polish independence. Historian Marcin Napiórkowski states in his upcoming book, *The Warsaw Uprising*, “How is it possible that after 75 years we are still arguing over the purpose of the Uprising?”⁵ Instead of accepting this event as something that we honor and commemorate, many people continue to argue over their sacrifice to prove the deaths could have been prevented, or were worth sacrificing at all.

If we see this event as a failure, or as something that could have been avoided, we are not respecting the sacrifices and choices of those who chose to fight for their freedom; even in a time of desperation to achieve their independence. For too long, the people of Warsaw were under Nazi control, and all they hoped was that in “the moment there would be freedom.”⁶ If they waited for help, this chance would be lost. Strategically, the Uprising failed; individually, however, they achieved their goal of fighting for freedom and gave the future generations a chance to live in peace. If we argue over its worth, we forget that Warsaw, an ancient city, rich in its own language, traditions, history, disappeared together with 98 percent of its Polish Jews.⁷ The people of Warsaw understood that freedom comes with a price, “instead of dying on their knees they would die fighting”⁸ for what they thought was right. This should be remembered as a source of pride and inspiration, where people wanted to make a change in the world.

Comparatively, when students visit concentration camps, such as Dachau, many see them as tourist attractions, rather than what the goal is for preserving these camps for people to learn about the atrocities of the past. The Dachau concentration camp was opened in 1933 and was the

⁵ "Remembering the Warsaw Uprising." Hoover Institution. Accessed June 19, 2019. <https://www.hoover.org/research/remembering-warsaw-uprising>.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ "Poland Must Remember the Truth of the Warsaw Uprising." The Globe and Mail. May 04, 2018. Accessed June 19, 2019. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-poland-must-remember-the-truth-of-the-warsaw-uprising/>.

⁸ *Battle of Warsaw*. Directed by Michael Praed. London: BBC Timewatch, 2006

model for all Nazi concentration camps. Later the camp grew into more than 30 large sub-camps in which 30,000 prisoners worked exclusively on armaments. The main purpose of Dachau was to imprison political prisoners or conscientious objectors to the Nazi ideology, which changed as the Second World War (1939-45) began. These included: Roma, homosexuals, repeat criminal offenders, Catholic clergy members who opposed the Nazi regime and Jews. By 1938, after *Kristallnacht*, more than 10,000 Jewish men were apprehended and sent to Dachau. After days of travel, with little or no food or water, new prisoners arrived weak and exhausted, often near death. With prisoners filing in, the camp held over 63,000 prisoners.⁹ Typhus epidemics became a serious problem due to overcrowding, poor sanitary conditions, insufficient provisions, and the weakened state of the prisoners.¹⁰ The camp evolved as a training center for Schutzstaffel (SS) camp guards, which allowed them to use prisoners in brutal medical experiments, like submerging them in a vat of ice water to test how long German pilots could survive if abandoned in the ocean¹¹. Similarly to the Warsaw Uprising, prisoners identified as individuals, fighting for their freedom. In 1945, prior to liberation, the Nazis ordered many prisoners to march to Tegernsee, a 72 kilometer walk from the camp. Those unable to maintain a steady marching pace were shot by SS; other marchers died from starvation or physical exhaustion.¹² On April 29, 1945 liberation came. The United States military entered Dachau concentration camp, where they found thousands of prisoners and discovered several dozen train cars loaded with rotting corpses. To the liberators surprise, the citizens of Dachau had turned a blind eye to the camp throughout the war. The American liberators, under the leadership of General Dwight D. Eisenhower, made sure the citizens of Dachau confronted the horrors that they participated in as bystanders, and marched them through the camp.

⁹ Editors, History.com. "Dachau." History.com. November 09, 2009. Accessed June 19, 2019. <https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/dachau>.

¹⁰ "Liberation." United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Accessed June 21, 2019. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/dachau>.

¹¹ "Nazi Science - The Dachau Hypothermia Experiments | NEJM." *New England Journal of Medicine*, www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJM199005173222006.

¹² Editors, History.com. "Dachau." History.com. November 09, 2009. Accessed June 19, 2019. <https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/dachau>.

Based on my personal experience visiting Dachau, people have neglected or have become ignorant to the intense reality that these concentration camps represented in the overall aim to annihilate the Jewish people from the face of the Earth. Last year, my family and I went on a month long trip to Europe. One of the stops we made was to the Dachau concentration camp. I understood the reason for the camp, but not as much as I do now. As we made our way through, I started to see that this place was not being fully respected as a place of commemoration. An example of this behavior was seeing parents wander the grounds with strollers and young children. The kids were too young to comprehend the meaning of this place. Not only that, but they ran around, screaming and playing on the prisoners beds, not fully understanding the intention or atmosphere. Many school groups were also attending while I was there. To me it was fantastic to see, but as I observed the students, many of them looked like they did not want to be there as they seemed apathetic to the content being delivered. Ignorance and a lack of compassion have left the horrors of the camp to be forgotten. Humanity seems to be moving in the wrong direction regarding human rights violations, and the importance of understanding what these people went through in a time of extreme and violent oppression; their story, to me, seems to be fading.

Through education and learning about history, we can honor the memory and purpose of the Warsaw Uprising and of those who were imprisoned at Dachau. It is important to learn about history and to become active citizens who are aware of these human rights abuses. We must not forget these sacrifices and struggles. In this essay, I have noted examples of people who are ignorant of history; I too was one of these people. When we went to the camp as a family, I had no desire to learn about the events that took place at the Dachau camp. But this year, history has become a passion of mine. Learning about the sacrifices of these individual people, has let me gain an appreciation for history and to become a promoter of human rights. As a teen, I could never imagine students my age going through struggles so colossal such as these; with their families (like mine) torn apart. Mina Rosner said “there is no guarantee that another Holocaust will not occur.”¹³ We need to take heed of these words and practice what we preach through tolerance and acceptance of human rights globally.

¹³ Rosner, Mina. *I Am a Witness*. Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1990.

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